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THE ORIGIN OF FOLK-MELODIES

BY PHILLIPS BARRY

THE inimitability of folk-song has long been the delight and the despair of poet and musician alike. Kipling alone has imitated the ballad style with any degree of success,¹ and to Foster we owe the only imitations of folk-music worthy of the name.² Yet neither has produced anything that in its present state can find place in the same class with "Child Maurice," or a folk-melody of undoubted authenticity, such as the following.

THE BANKS OF THE ROSES.³

The reason is, that folk-song, in fact, is song alive. It is subject to perpetual, and often extremely capricious, erratic processes of change and growth.⁴ Of the exact nature of these processes, which may be conveniently grouped under the head of "tradition," or, better, of "communal re-creation,"⁵ much still remains a matter for debate. Their results, however, at least the most obvious of them, are well known; namely, multiplicity of versions, and impersonality of authorship, — unfailingly characteristic features of poetry of the folk, and music of the folk, the world over.

In analyzing the influence of tradition on folk-song, it is necessary, first, that the word be used in its widest sense. It must not be stated, on the basis of internal evidence alone, that one song, widely current among the folk, is a folk-song, and another is not. The ephemeral popular melodies of the day are folk-melodies in the making. A composed tune of this sort, given time enough and folk-singers enough,

¹ See "The Last Rhyme of True Thomas."

² Yet the melody of "Old Folks at Home" is very likely borrowed from "Annie Laurie," as are the melodies of "Way down in Ca-i-ro" and "Old Uncle Ned" clearly reminiscent, respectively, of "Oft in the Silly Night" and "Rosin the Bow."

³ "The Banks of the Roses," A, *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*. From S. C., Boston, Mass., as sung in Co. Tyrone, Ireland.

⁴ Deviations from the composer's *ipsissima verba* (or *puncta*), from the viewpoint of art-song, are errors, from the viewpoint of folk-song, constitute communal re-creation.

⁵ The choice of one or another set of a folk-melody as authentic, to the exclusion of all other sets, as in the case of "Yankee Doodle," is but arbitrary.

may remain in tradition so long, that its form and melodic structure will be more or less markedly changed. Indeed, in the case of the following melody, this has actually happened.

COME BACK TO ERIN.¹



The foregoing represents but one of a possible large number of variants, derived by oral tradition from the original melody. So also in the case of the air to "The Rose of Allan Dale,"² a similar result has taken place. The obvious derivation of the several sets of the air, as sung by American college students, is at once apparent. Moreover, "Yankee Doodle," as whistled in the streets to-day, differs from the set current at the close of the Revolution.³

Such, then, is the re-creative and transforming influence of oral tradition, carried through a greater or lesser period of time.⁴

¹ From S. C., Boston, Mass., as sung by a soldier in Ireland. Compare with the above the corresponding phrases of the original melody composed by Charlotte A. Barnard (Claribel): —



² Composed by S. Nelson. Compare "General Grant" (*Harvard University Songs* p. 21) and "The Mermaid" (*Columbia University Songs*, p. 50), these being the best-known variants.

³ The accompanying set is from a manuscript of 1790: —



⁴ J. Meier, *Kunstlieder im Volksmunde*, p. cxii. —

"In vollständig gleicher Weise wie die Texte werden die Melodien zerstückt und zerfasert. Das Volk geht hier ganz ebenso vor, es verwendet Theile alter Volkweisen, verknüpft verschiedene Lieder oder Theile von solchen zu neuen Melodien, und verfährt ebenso mit dem Gut gebildeter Musiker. Auch hier sehen wir Compositionen und

Turning now to a study of contemporaneously current ballad airs, — instructive not only as further and more convincing illustrations of communal re-creation, but also for the light they shed on the vexed problem of origins, — let us examine four sets of a melody to the ballad "Fair Charlotte," as sung in different parts of the country.

First set.¹Second set.²Third set.³Fourth set.⁴

Theile von solchen einfach herüber genommen, in Stücke zerlegt, umgesungen, und zu neuen Gebilden geformt."

See also W. Tappert, "Wandernde Melodien," for a discussion of the reflex influence on art-music.

¹ Recorded by M. W., Cameron, Clinton Co., Missouri. (Communicated by Professor Henry M. Belden, University of Missouri.)

² "Fair Charlotte," D., *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*. From N. A. C., Rome, Pa.

³ From H. S., Mexico, Missouri. (Communicated by Professor Henry M. Belden, University of Missouri.)

⁴ From M. D., Columbia, Missouri. (Communicated by Professor Henry M. Belden, University of Missouri.)

The close relationship of the foregoing sets is apparent at once. It is to be noted, that whereas the first set is composed of four elements, — a, b, c, d, — the remainder are composed of but three, — a, b, b', c; the partial melody in the second measure having by communal re-creation become assimilated to the partial melody in the third measure. To the same cause is due the loss of the plagal cadence in the fourth set.¹

A more complicated instance of relationship — owing to the fact that both ballad and melody are very old, and have been subjected to a much longer period of communal re-creation — is observed in the case of "Lord Randall." Not only are at least ten sets in existence, but from the same source as the melody to "Lord Randall" are descended the airs "Lochaber no More,"² "King James's March to Ireland," "Limerick's Lamentation," and "Reeve's Maggot." For the purpose of the present investigation, however, it will be sufficient to put in evidence six sets from New England, five of which are very closely related.

First set.³



Second set.⁴



Third set.⁵



¹ It is not unlikely that the first set may be identical with the original air, the second set not far removed, whereas the fourth set is most distant of all.

² "Lochaber" has probably been affected also by conscious individual recomposition, as well as by subconscious communal re-creation.

³ "Lord Randall," I, *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*. (From G. B., Boston, Mass.)

⁴ "Lord Randall," K, *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*. (From H. E. K., New York, N. Y., as traditional in Pomfret, Conn.)

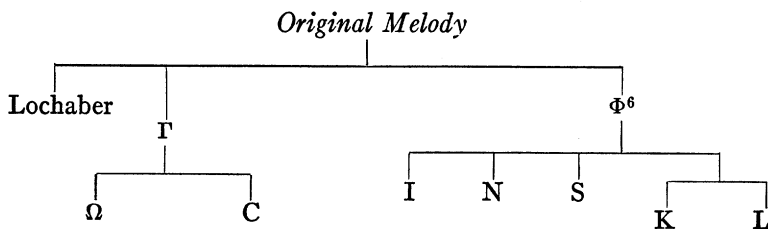
⁵ "Lord Randall," L, *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*. (From R. P. U., Cambridge, Mass., as traditional in Charlestown, N. H.)

Fourth set.¹Fifth set.²

It will be seen at once, that, though there are some marked differences in the above sets, they are not as great as the variations in the different versions of the ballad.³ Moreover, where there is similarity, it amounts almost to identity. Nor is it too much to suppose that these five sets are descended from a common source, removed, however, by several degrees from the original air to "Lord Randall." The relationship of the following set, more distant, it is true, is yet recognizably apparent.

Sixth set.⁴

The accompanying diagram will serve to show roughly the relationship to the original melody of the foregoing sets, and some others, not mentioned here.⁵



¹ "Lord Randall," N, *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*. (From G. T. A., Boston, Mass., as sung by an Irish serving-man.)

² "Lord Randall," S, *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*. From E. W. H., Watertown, Mass.

³ See my article, "Traditional Ballads in New England," in *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, vol. xviii, pp. 201, 203-205, for versions I, K, L, N, of the ballad.

⁴ "Lord Randall," C, *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*. From A. M., source unknown.

⁵ The diagram is merely tentative, — a further degree of exactness being impossible, owing to the fact that so many of the intermediary sets of the melody have perished. For convenience, Φ may be assumed as the original of the closely related Irish sets (N. A. S. — I, K, L, N, S), and Γ as the source of the Scottish sets, represented by N. A. S., C, and the set in Johnson's Musical Museum, here designated as Ω.

⁶ The set designated as φ, from which are derived I, K, L, N, S, is almost certainly

Examples might be multiplied. Thus in the case of "Barbara Allan," it is certain that several distinct melodies have come down to us, resolved into sets by the re-creative force of oral tradition. The same may be proved for "The Golden Vanity." At some time in the nineteenth century a melody was sung to "Springfield Mountain," which now appears in a number of more or less diversified sets,¹ each sung to a different version of the ballad. "Lord Randall," however, is in all probability unique as being the only old ballad which has retained its original melody.

Unto its present state, then, folk-music has evolved. Yet individual invention must be the ultimate origin of the oldest folk-melody in existence. By the subsequent history of each is measured the difference between such a folk-melody and latest air from musical comedy; for into the folk-melody have gone not only the inventive efforts of the composer, but also the slowly transmitted re-creative influences of a large number of folk-singers, good, bad, and indifferent.

BOSTON, MASS.

of Irish origin. In the ballad itself, the name is "Terence," variously corrupted, — I, Tyrante, K, Taranty, N, Tyranting, S, Wrentham. Moreover, in the sets K, L, S, the close is characteristically Irish.

¹ See my article, "Traditional Ballads in New England," in *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, vol. xviii, pp. 298, 300, 301.